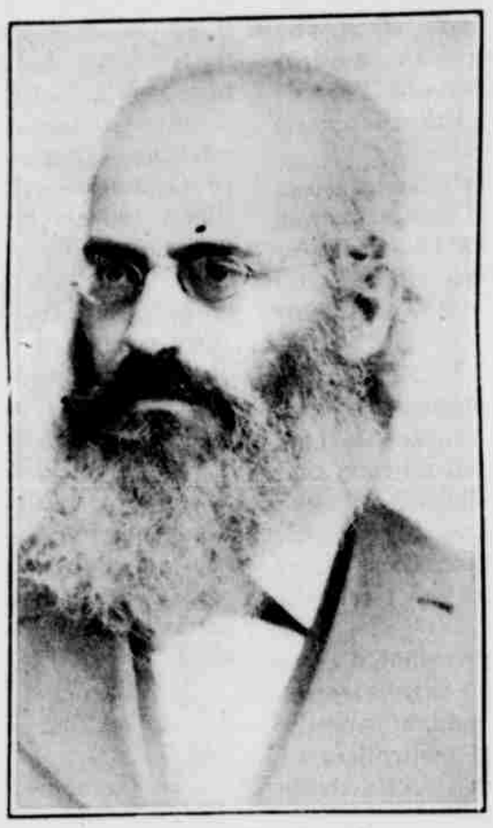
Saw First Gold in California

RODNEY C. ADAMS, aged eighty-nine years, is the last person alive who saw the first gold mined in California. He was born in Madison County, Illinois, in 1831, and when a child emigrated to Western Missouri with his parents. In 1847 he went with his parents in the Mormon ox train to what is now Salt Lake City. On the route across the plains his parents dissented from the Mormons in their polygamy doctrines. At the first chance young Adams and his parents pushed on across the Sierras.

Now Rodney Adams, an aged man living with his granddaughter in Riverside County, is the last alive, as far as Californians can find out, who was close to James Marshall when the first golden nuggets were found. He is writing his recollections of California before the miners came, and a publisher is awaiting copy as it is slowly ground out. His recollections have been invaluable for Pacific Coast historians.



RODNEY C. ADAMS

"I recall that morning in January, 1848, when James Marshall found the first gold," said Mr. Adams as he sat in his granddaughter's house at Hemet, California, the other day. "I was vacquero for Captain John Sutter, although I was but a youth. I was away with cattle the morning Marshall found the gold.

"I got back to the ranch house late in the afternoon, and Jim Marshall, who had been building a mill race for Sutter's grist mill, was sitting on the house front steps. I recall that Marshall was more cheerful than usual.

"He motioned me to come to him, as I dropped from my mustang, and said in low tones:

"'Rod, what'd you say if I could show this whole country full of gold?'

"What could I say, a green boy off the plains? What did I know of a gold-crazy world? I kept my mouth shut, and looked wise. Marshall then took me to one side, and told me in half-whispers how he had found five chunks of native gold as large as filberts. He showed me the nuggets, upon which he had experimented by boiling, hammering and scraping to find whether they really were gold. Marshall had no idea then that his discovery was so important. His mind was set on the mill which he had almost finished and on several mechanical devices he had invented in it. Among the things he said to me about the gold he had found was that some day he was going to hunt systematically for more gold nuggets and that he might get a few thousand dollars of a fortune together in that way. He had absolutely no idea of the vastness of the mining possibilities his discovery would lead to.

"So little did the finding of the gold disturb either of us that I remember that we went to bed early and slept soundly. Marshall cautioned me to keep the gold find a secret. But Marshall was loquacious and he himself bragged of his find. Five days later several Mexicans brought in more nuggets. Then the Mormons, who were working for Sutter and Marshall, found gold and the importance of the find increased a little in the minds of Marshall and all of us at the Coloma camp. A few years later, when the world's commerce was turned, as Lord Derby said, by the gold discovery in California, and when more than 300,000 young men had flocked to California, and had made a new civilization, I wondered how we could have been so blind at first to the meaning of the first nuggets that Marshall picked up.

"The news did not get down to San Francisco, about 150 miles away, until three months later. When the gold was shown him, Captain Sutter said, 'Yes, that's gold, and it will be the curse of us;' meaning that it was the end of their schemes for a big sawmill and flour mill along the American River.

"But another week passed before the belief became general at San Francisco that back in the mountains gold had actually been found. I remember that educated men argued that the geological formation of the Sierras made the finding of gold there an absurdity. Some said the golden flakes exhibited were iron pyrites, and others laughed and said they were from a copper formation. The San Francisco *Star* pitied people who could believe there was gold enough in all California to buy even a respectable meal.

"Later—on May 12, I believe—a Scotch ranchman rode into San Francisco directly from the diggings. He was an intelligent and reputable man. He brought with him about 200 pounds of gold dust and nuggets to trade for merchandise. Then there was excitement and bustle. All that day and night the saloons were thronged with men who talked of nothing but the chances there might be for them in mining. One man, a Mormon, was so wild with excitement at the thought of digging gold that he went up and down the bay shore yelling, 'Gold, gold, gold.' Several saloon men who could not sell their stock locked up their places, determined to let them go to the dogs while they were washing gold.

"The earliest stampede of excited men to the gold diggings of California therefore began May 12, 1848. I remember that day in San Francisco. The whole population of the town did not sleep and scarcely took time to eat until the first crowd had embarked on all manner of craft up the river to what is now Stockton, thence across the country to the north fork of the American River. By the first of June the news of the discovery had gone as far down the coast as Monterey. The gold diggers at Coloma were by this time sending out so much gold to buy provisions, tools and clothing that convincing evidence of the richness of the sand bars and creek banks followed closely upon the heels of the news. All in Central California who could get away went chasing over the country toward the American Fork. Less than one-twelfth of the male population of San Francisco remained when June had come. Whole families packed up and went to Coloma. On two streets of homes and stores none but women and children remained. Half the stores and every public inn were closed because both boarders and hosts had gone to the American Fork. The village of Santa Cruz packed up and started for the mines in twenty-four hours. The news of the gold find and samples of the gold reached Monterey late in May, and in two days every man in the village but five started for the American Fork. The village of San Miguel, with some 500 population, was absolutely deserted by every human being during the first week in June and I don't believe there were even three men in a hundred who remained at home in California in the spring and summer of 1848. I remember hearing a fellow miner tell how he had found the jail at Monterey empty, the prisoners, sheriff and all the peace officers at the mines, and of seeing General Mason, of the United States Army, and a commodore of the United States Navy, cooking their own food in a deserted hotel at Monterey, because all their servants and men had deserted in the night and had followed the rush toward the American Fork. By July there must have been bout 5,000 miners at work with shovels and pans along the American Fork, and there were arrivals from more remote localities in California every day. Between 7,000 and 8,000 Californians in that first season of gold mining, from May to January, got fully $10,000,000 worth of gold.

"The first year of gold mining in California—that is from May, 1848 to May, 1849—was far different in its easy, quiet way from that created by the excited gold-hungry Easterners, who with the opening of the spring and summer of 1849 came swarming across the plains, over the isthmus and around the horn. There was little or no gambling. The miners left their pounds of gold under their beds and went unconcernedly miles from camp. There were no mining laws to be considered. It was a perfect mining Elysium.

"As I look back at those days now it seems we were like big children going about in a vast natural treasure house, wondering how much riches we might carry away when we were ready, but meanwhile frittering away our time and opportunities. When I remember the whole acres of gravel and sand, richer than anything ever found on the Klondike, that we abandoned because we heard of a better El Dorado on another remote creek or river, it seems as if that era must have been a dream.

"The restlessness and greed to get the very cream of the diggings kept the greater part of us poor in spite of the fabulous opportunities.

"The unhappiest and most pitiful man of all the tens of thousands of men who washed gold up and down on almost every creek in Central California was Marshall—the discoverer of the gold. He became a drinking, profane man when he saw how his and Captain Sutter's property was ruined by the excited gold seekers, who entered upon it without even asking the right. He threatened legal prosecution. His threats were but hooted and jeered. He promised vast sums for lawyers who would eject the thousands of gold miners from his and Sutter's land, but no one heeded his words. He went about from camp to camp fuming and threatening the men that he would soon dispossess them of their gold by legal process. He claimed the legal right to all the gold in that locality, and he swore that he would never mine an ounce till the United States laws drove out the trespassers and restored the property to Sutter and him. No one but the Mormons paid any attention to Marshall. The Mormons recognized Marshall's rights and they used to deal out to him and Sutter part of their nuggets and dust at stated periods.

"The Mormons, who were about the first men in the new diggings, located on the north fork of the American River. I have seen them wash out gravel at the rate of $3.50 a pan for hours at a time. They were secretive fellows, but I had it on good authority that they cleared more than $150,000 in several months in 1848. The best I ever did in any one day was in the summer of 1892. Partner and I were operating a rocker on the Tuolumne and were working in a streak of gravel about two feet below surface. We got an average of eleven ounces of gold every day for two weeks. Unfortunately our claim petered out quickly after that. The man whose claim adjoined mine had better luck. He had an area of 500 square feet to work and between September, 1848, and May, 1849, he got out 130 pounds of gold.

"I knew James Marshall intimately until he died alone and in poverty in his lonely cabin at Coloma one day in August, 1885. He became a hard drinker as he grew old. His treatment by the horde of miners embittered him against the world. He was so bothered by the tourists and reporters, who wanted to hear him tell his story, that he went back into the mountains to live by himself. California gave him a pension of $1,200 a year for a few years, but that was cut off because the legislature believed the money was spent in drink. Leland Stanford once agreed to give the old man the use of a pretty cottage in Oakland, but Marshall said he would not accept charity."

A Fish That Builds a Nest

IN THE shallow fresh water streams that empty into the oceans, the sea lampreys build their nests each spring, and for the person who is lucky enough to discover these eel-like fish at work building their nest there is a really interesting sight in store.

The lampreys are not fishes, for they have no paired fins, and the formation of their mouths is different from that of a fish. In appearance they closely resemble the eel, and, as an eel, might not be given a second thought. Lampreys are found both in Europe and America, and the sea lamprey is the largest member of the family, sometimes reaching a length of three feet. Their mouths are cap-shaped, and have great suction power.

A shallow stream with a pebbly bottom is chosen for the nest, two or three lampreys working together.

After the site of the nest has been found, the lampreys use their mouths to suck up and lift the pebbles from the stream bed, carrying them outside the space needed for the eggs. If a stone should be encountered that is too large to be lifted, the lamprey charges against it, head on, butting the stone over and over till it is rolled away. Lampreys have been known to move stones as big as a half brick.

When the nest is finished it is about three feet wide, and from four to six inches deep. The eggs, resembling pear-shaped grains of sand, and invisible to the untrained eye, are scattered over the nest. They hatch in about two weeks, after the nest has been deserted by the elders and the removed pebbles washed into place again by the action of the water.

The young lamprey looks so greatly different from the mature fish that it was once thought to be a different fish. The young live in the shallow stream of their birth for three or four years before obtaining full growth, and then swim out to the sea, where, at the end of another three or four years—the exact amount of time has never been certain—they reach maturity, and return to some fresh water stream to make their nest. At sea they obtain food by fastening themselves to some fish and scraping the flesh with their sharp teeth. It is possible for a lamprey to hold on to the bottom of a vessel and travel miles.

The work of the building of the nest is frequently the last labor of the lamprey. They are nearly always injured in moving the stones that lie in the spot they wish to use for a nest, and into these wounds microbes find their way and cause disease which results in death. They swim to the bank not far from their nest, and find a final resting-place, seemingly sacrificing their lives for their young.

Lampreys are good to eat, and in some localities are considered a delicacy, but their flesh is very rich and indigestible.

How Animals Sleep

ELEPHANTS sleep standing up. When in a herd, a certain number will always stand watch while the others sleep, for the big, powerful beasts are timid and cautious at night and will not go to sleep unguarded.

Bats sleep head downward, hanging by their hind claws.

Birds, with few exceptions, sleep with their heads turned tailward over the back and the beak thrust beneath the wing.

Storks, gulls and other long-legged birds sleep standing on one leg.

Ducks sleep on open water. To avoid drifting ashore, they keep paddling with one foot, thus making them move in a circle.

Foxes and wolves sleep curled up, their noses and the soles of their feet close together and blanketed by their bushy tails.

Lions, tigers and cat animals stretch themselves out flat upon the side. Their muscles twitch and throb, indicating that they are light and restless sleepers.

Owls, in addition to their eyelids, have screens that they draw sideways across their eyes to shut out the light, for they sleep in the daytime.

The Origin of "Tenderfoot"

NO TERM used in the Far West is more significant than "tenderfoot," and in no connection is it more used than in relation to horsemanship.

If a person approaches a horse to catch him or saddle him from the "off" side, or mounts or dismounts on that side, he is more sure to be styled a "tenderfoot," than when he cannot shoot straight. The tough western mustang or broncho used in the mountains and on the ranches in the Southwest was formerly never shod. His hoofs grew so tough that shoes were not only unnecessary, but a hindrance, for tough unshod hoofs are much more sure-footed on rocky trails than are iron shoes. After once being shod, however, the hoof always needs it, and becomes very tender and lame without an iron shoe. As nothing is more useless to a western ranchman or guide than a lame horse, and as shoeing was not easy in the early days, a "tenderfoot" horse was despised. The unshod "toughfoot" was always reliable. Hence we have the western term to donate a "greenhorn."